

Transforming Relationship series
Sermon #3 – Downward Mobility
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For a long time throughout ancient history, everyone assumed that the Earth was the center of the universe. Everyone from Greek philosophers like Aristotle to Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas operated with the assumption that everything, including the sun, revolved around the earth. The concept of the earth at the center reflected God's central concern for humankind. This belief became so central to the church's theology that to challenge it was considered a heresy, punishable by making you sit through the sermon twice on Sunday.

Along came a man named Nicolaus Copernicus, who had the audacity to suggest that the solar system was heliocentric, meaning it revolved around the sun, and not around the earth. In the 1500s he published a book called "On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres," which was a lot more interesting than the title sounds and which claimed, among other things, that the earth was not the center of the universe. That book launched what became known as the Copernican revolution, which was the starting point of modern astronomy and completely changed how we understand our relationship to and role in the universe.

If you're like me, you probably know a few people who need to read, "On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres," because they are still under the erroneous assumption that they, and not the sun, are at the center of our solar system. Instead of being heliocentric, they are me-centric. Everything revolves around them.

Today, we continue our look at qualities that transform our relationships. We've already talked about the importance of paying attention and of being generous and accepting. Now, we will look at the characteristic of humility, which John Calvin called "the sovereign virtue...the mother and root of all virtue."

Let me say right up front that by encouraging humility I'm not try to destroy your self-confidence or make you feel any less worthy than you are. I'm not trying to make you feel so bad about yourself that you don't have any choice but to be humble. Rick Warren says that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. And I believe that the more we think less of ourselves, the better relational partner we will become.

But that's hard to do, because our world today doesn't encourage humility. Humility is not valued, because so often being humble is seen as being weak, as not being assertive, as letting yourself be a doormat for others. In a culture that demands strong individuality and cultivates a self-promoting mentality, there's not much room for humility. Boxing promoter Don King summed up this worldview when he said in an L.A. Times article, "I never cease to amaze myself – and I say that humbly."

We have been conditioned to believe that it's not only good but necessary to be me-centric. And it starts when we're very young. I believe every child is inherently selfish, because they don't know any different. Leigh and Molly stopped by church this week as garage sale setup was taking place, and Molly kept wanting to go downstairs, where all the toys were. That's just a bad idea. Half that stuff down there was hers that we were trying to get rid of, anyway, and if she had gone down there, we may have never

seen her again. So she threw a fit because she couldn't get her way. That me-o-centric mindset grows unabated as we get older. Remember the old Burger King slogan? "Have it your way." We live in a culture that tells us over and over and over that we should have everything our way, and we actually begin to believe that.

That's why I think true humility is such a fleeting virtue in our culture. It's one of those paradoxical things that you only truly have if you don't know you have it. We all know people who exude a false humility, who go out of their way to show you how humble they are. But if you have to draw attention to your humility – "Hey, aren't you amazed by how humble I am?" - chances are it's not really a genuine virtue.

For a true definition of humility, I believe we have to leave this world behind and return to Jesus' time. If anyone had reason not to be humble, it was Jesus. And yet not once do we hear him use his status to get ahead: "What do you mean my robe hasn't been dry cleaned yet? Do you know who I am? I'm the son of God!" Instead, we get stories like Jesus taking a towel and washing the dusty feet of the disciples, or we hear him make statements like in John 5, when he says, "the Son can do nothing by himself." Or we hear Jesus saying over and over, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted." If we want to know what true humility looks like, Jesus is our best example.

Yet even that doesn't make this a cut-and-dried topic. Yes, we are called to be Christ-like, but if the criteria for being humble is not knowing you are being humble, then how are we to measure it? How can we know if our relationships are characterized by humility? We can measure time spent with a loved one or the number of phone calls to a friend, but how do we measure humility?

I think we have to not think about humility with the end result in mind. The irony is that as soon as you think, "Ah, I'm finally being humble!" you've lost it, because at the heart of humility is self-forgetfulness. Humility is defined by an orientation to the other that precludes us from looking inward. When we stop focusing on ourselves, we become more aware of those around us. We don't become humble as much as we learn to practice humility.

But before we can make progress in our growth, we have to come to terms with something else growing inside of us, something evil and insidious and the complete opposite of humility, and that's our pride. Pride is the desire to be served, to be honored, to be noticed, and it's nothing less than the desire to be treated like God.

We see it first in the Garden of Eden, when Eve is tempted to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempts her by telling her if she eats it, she will become like God, and she takes a bite and shares it with Adam. And from that moment on, we humans have been fighting the temptation to live me-o-centric lives. If we're too full of ourselves, we leave no room for God or for each other.

If we desire to be treated like God, we will always be disappointed, because we will never measure up. And yet pride will keep whispering in our ears that we deserve such treatment. Pride lifts us up at the expense of others; it makes us feel good by making them feel bad. And these feelings can even sneak into our most important relationships.

We battle pride by practicing humility. One of the ways we do this is that we are open to the fact that there is almost always other ways of seeing things besides our own. Practicing humility means NOT assuming we're right and the other person is wrong just because they disagree with us. What if we started evaluating our own lives with the same

scrutiny we sometimes use to evaluate others? If we are dissatisfied with a relationship, what if we focused on how we've failed in that relationship instead of focusing how the other person has failed us? Such thoughts are the seeds of humility bearing fruit.

Another way we can practice humility is being more intentional about how we see the worth of another person. When I was young, I would often go into work with my dad, and I noticed that he always smiled and waved to the security guard as we entered and left the building where my dad was a manager. I thought it was strange that my dad, a man of such importance at his business, would take the time to acknowledge this part-time worker. I asked him why he did it, and he said, "Son, you should be nice to everyone, because you never know who's going to be your boss."

That reminds me of the passage in Hebrews 13 that says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Practicing humility means assuming that everyone we meet is an angel, or at the least has the image of God inside of them, and therefore deserves our respect, regardless of whether they have earned it or not. Practicing humility means acknowledging that, despite the difficulties presented by others, the person we know who is most difficult to deal with is us.

Most importantly, practicing humility means pointing not at ourselves, but to the one who is greater than us. A me-centric life craves the spotlight and wants to be the center of attention. A me-centric person assumes that they have earned the right to their lifestyle and possessions and relationships. But a person who is practicing humility acknowledges that being in a relationship has nothing to do with our own achievements and everything to do with the other person having the grace to not only put up with us, but to be in a genuine relationship with us. That, to me, defines the grace of God.

A prideful person will always be disappointed, because they will never measure up to being treated like God. But a humble person will never be disappointed, because there will always be someone to serve and to lift up. May we honor Micah's command to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God – and with each other.